



Jaume Plensa

Human Landscape

With tranquil expressions, like those often seen on the faces of ancient statuary depicting sacred luminaries such as Athena or the Buddha, Jaume Plensa's figures seem distanced from the turmoil of the world. Yet he also employs a variety of stylistic devices that integrate the sacred with the worldly—those physical, psychological, and social impulses that distinguish and unite people.

Plensa's fascination with life's duality is apparent in the monumental head *Isabella* (2014), on view outside the Frist Center. The figure's eyes are shut to suggest inwardness, sleeping, or dreaming. But instead of lying down, she is upright, so that her closed eyes impute a balance between consciousness and detachment. Seen frontally, the work is proportioned in accordance with classical standards of youthful beauty; it is symmetrical, unblemished, and utterly graceful. But, viewed from the side, the head is anamorphically distorted; that is, it is flattened and elongated, compressed into angularity. In designing the sculpture, Plensa digitally altered the source image, emphasizing the malleability of the human form (in contrast to the tradition of depicting the ideal anatomy as a fixed manifestation of human perfection) while calling attention to the work's status as an artifact of the computer age.



Figure 1

The intervention with classicism continues in the exhibition's central gallery. There, the alabaster head *Laura II* (2013) veers from idealism to overt signs of degradation, and even violence. The sculpture portrays a girl's head, her face a blend of different racial characteristics; she is exquisitely

Illustrations

Cover: *Laura II*, 2015. Alabaster. Photo: Fotografia Gasull. © Plensa Studio Barcelona. **Figure 1:** *Isabella* (installation view at the Frist Center), 2014. Cast iron. Photo: John Schweikert. **Figure 2:** *See no Evil, Hear no Evil, Speak no Evil* (from the 2012 installation *In the Midst of Dreams*, EMMA–Espoo Museum of Modern Art, Helsinki, Finland), 2010. Polyester resin, stainless steel, and LED lights. Photo: Ari Karttunen. © EMMA. **Figure 3:** *See no Evil, Hear no Evil, Speak no Evil* (detail of *See no Evil* from the 2011 installation at *Jaume Plensa*, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, West Bretton, UK), 2010. Polyester resin, stainless steel, and LED lights. Photo: Laura Medina. © Plensa Studio Barcelona. **Figure 4:** Portrait of the artist, Umeå, Sweden, 2012. Photo: Laura Medina. © Plensa Studio Barcelona. All works © Jaume Plensa. Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

and generically beautiful. The work is highly polished—smooth as young skin and inviting to the touch. The top of her head, however, appears to have been sheared off, as if dropped or mauled in some iconoclastic fury, a year or a millennium ago. Permanence is only a concept and never a truth; even stone has a finite existence. The broken head reminds us that to be human is to be frail and incomplete.

In other works, the introduction of language aligns spirituality with psychology. The exhibition's centerpiece, *See no Evil, Hear no Evil, Speak no Evil* (2010), is composed of three figures, each internally illuminated as if from a life force within—an allusion, perhaps, to a soul. The luminous bodies are slightly chunky but ethereal: “fat angels who cannot fly,” Plensa calls them.¹ Despite the mystical aura of their light, they share a sense of disquiet through the placement on their surfaces of psychologically charged words such as “stress,” “anxiety,” and “hysteria.”



Figure 2

The figures' poses reinforce these indicators of distress. With knees drawn up in a protective, quasi-fetal position, they are positioned halfway up the wall, horizontally jutting out in defiance of gravity. They hold their hands over their eyes, ears, and mouth respectively, echoing the story of the three monkeys who block their senses to keep evil from entering in or going out. The parable is concerned with the double-edgedness of rejecting the world; it corrupts but also holds great beauty and meaning, which cannot be fully known without our senses. Plensa also means for the

figures to remind us of the importance of communication: “We are unwilling to say the right words, to see the key images or to listen to the important sounds. How many times our mouth is not saying the words that we would have said; our eyes cannot express our real intentions, or our ears are sealed to listen.”²

While the materials Plensa used in *Isabella, Laura II*, and *See no Evil, Hear no Evil, Speak no Evil* are as seductive as their imagery, he hopes viewers will think less about such aspects as weight, volume, light, and surface and more about how the materials allude to what they are not: “When for some reason you understand that life is not a physical problem and that physical material is hiding something essential, you must talk about spirituality.”³ As a fundamental means of expressing spirituality, language itself transcends materiality—it disappears from the air, if not the



Figure 3

memory, after being spoken or sung, and script can always be erased, burned, or deleted. Yet the ideas defined by text are more permanent than stone, connecting people through time and across space.

Plensa resolves this paradox, making language into something physical, even three-dimensional—text as sculptural form. He often applies words or phrases to his works, taken from favorite authors such as William Blake, François Rabelais, and William Shakespeare. But he also uses pure typography—

letters as designed objects—from different world alphabets as graphic reminders of the universal significance of these cultural building blocks. “Each letter is a possibility,” Plensa says. He describes his rationale for breaking down language to its most basic element: “After a long period using quotes and sentences from poets, I decided to work only with letters and alphabets: the most biological part of the text, it means the letter as a ‘cell.’ One letter seems nothing, but in association with others, they could compose a word, one word with another word could compose a text, a text with another text,” and so on. He adds that letters provide “a beautiful metaphor about society” as a composite of individuals.⁴

Plensa’s sociobiological metaphor reverses the biblical story of Babel: the diversity of languages can unite people with beauty and hope rather than divide them through incomprehensibility. This is the theme of *Talking Continents III* (2014), an installation of suspended ovoid elements that evoke associations with natural forms such as eggs, clouds, islands, or even asteroids. The forms are made from die-cut letters from an international array of alphabets—Arabic, Chinese, Cyrillic, English, Greek, Hebrew, Hindi, Japanese, and Latin. Human figures sit atop several of the forms, supporting Plensa’s notion that “we are each a country, an island . . . linked and separated by an ocean. As far as we are so different and unique, we can collaborate, we can exchange information, but never compete.”⁵

These topographies of letters convey an open interchange between cultures, and between inner and outer worlds. Like all of Plensa’s works, they transcend boundaries of tradition and experience, operating on many levels at once, but in the end, celebrating the timeless language of the body.

Mark Scala

Chief Curator

Notes

1. Jaume Plensa, interview by Clare Lilley, in *Jaume Plensa* (exh. cat., Yorkshire Sculpture Park, West Bretton, UK, 2011), 130.
2. Jaume Plensa, e-mail to Mark Scala, August 16, 2014.
3. Plensa, interview, 133.
4. Plensa, e-mail.
5. Plensa, interview, 131.



Figure 4

About the artist

Jaume Plensa was born in 1955 in Barcelona, Spain, where he continues to live and work. He has exhibited his work in museums and at public sites around the world and has received many awards, including the Medaille de Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres, awarded by the French Ministry of Culture (1995); the Government of Catalonia’s National Prize for Fine Art (1997); the National Prize for Fine Arts in Spain (2012); and the Velázquez Plastic Arts Prize (2013). Plensa is represented by Galerie Lelong (New York and Paris) and the Richard Gray Gallery (Chicago).

JAUME PLENSA

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June 5–September 7, 2015

Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery

Jaume Plensa: Human Landscape was jointly organized by the Frist Center for the Visual Arts and Cheekwood Botanical Garden & Museum of Art (May 22–November 1).

In conjunction with the exhibition, Plensa's *Isabella* (2014) is on view at the Frist Center's Demonbreun Street entrance until October 2016.



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The Frist Center for the Visual Arts is supported in part by

